

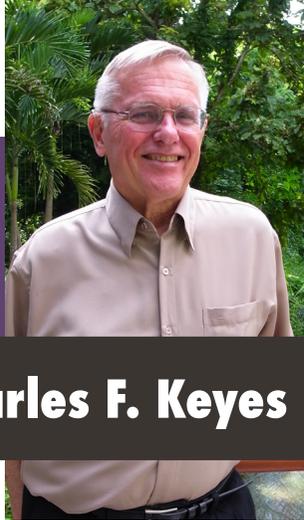
A Romance of the Rural Middle Class:

AN INTERVIEW

WITH

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Q Currently, it seems that the rural cosmopolitan class leads the transformational wave in the region. What is your vision towards this movement at a regional level?

A I think you have to distinguish between different types of rural people. In a way, the rural cosmopolitan that I wrote about is not middle class. In all countries in Asia, you have a significant increase in educational level. So the rural people or peoples living in the rural communities have that much more education. Some of those people, who live in the rural areas, have gone on into education to move out of rural societies. They have become upwardly mobile, instead of physically mobile. They have got important distinctions. They are people from the rural areas who have become upwardly mobile and the indigenous who have become physically mobile. The upwardly mobile people move eventually into the urban middle class, not into the rural middle class. Let me give you an example; there is a factory in Northeastern Thailand specializing in linen factories and being the center for all the major companies around the world like GAP and things like that. There is one young man who works as a designer of the clothing in this factory. He is a villager by background, but he got educated and became technically efficient, so that he can be hired anywhere, almost anywhere in the world. That is a different type of upwardly mobile, middle class rural person, and the same goes for very large numbers of people who go to work outside their home communities to find wage labor that makes more money. Then they can come back and participate in some of the consumer economy which we think is a rural middle class economy. You have, literally, tens of thousands of people from Northeastern Thailand, Northern Vietnam, Burma, and Cambodia moving away from their home communities in search of jobs; most of them are low-paying jobs, but not all. They take their money and go back to their villages and invest in their houses, better clothing and things like that back in their home communities. And that is what I wrote about and what I called "cosmopolitan villagers" - people who are engaged in working abroad, working outside their home communities, but who come

back to their villages, and it distinguishes them from those who are upwardly mobile and moving into the urban middle class.

Q So the mindset gap has widened among less favorable and the more favorable regions?

A If you wonder where the labor came from, in the 19th century there was a huge migration of people of Chinese descent, basically from Southeastern China to Southeast Asia. They moved to Vietnam, Thailand, Indonesia and Malaysia and they became the working class of those countries. If you were to come to Bangkok in 1900, those people working on the docks, they were people of Chinese descent. Then they became upwardly mobile and they moved into the urban middle class, and their descendants and they are no longer working class. They have been replaced by people who came from other areas. In Thailand, they began to be replaced by people from Northeastern Thailand, in Vietnam from Northern Vietnam. Then, in the modern world, you can see Indonesians in Malaysia, or Khmers and Burmese in Thailand. That has been seen from a century or a century and a half ago. Some of them go ahead and become upwardly mobile; they become truly urban middle class.

Q How might this phenomenon affect the way Chinese rural communities are going to change in the near future?

A What I have read about the Chinese is that initially, when they began to open their economy, they specifically did not allow rural people to move into urban areas, while they have had to have people working in factories and so on. So, a lot of migration took place illegally, and you now have huge numbers of people who are still rural in legal status, but in fact they work in factories. That became a major force of attention and I think that is going to continue to be a major force of attention in China. In Vietnam, they did

not put the same restrictions on people moving into the cities like they did in China, but have been more open (toward allowing domestic migration).

Q How do you see an interconnection between concepts of rural cosmopolitan and cosmopolitanism regarding the rural middle class?

A I think there are two types of middle classes in the world currently, at least, which is not quite the same anywhere else in Southeast Asia or in Asia yet. One of them is people who genuinely move into urban lifestyles and become upwardly mobile. They still see themselves connected with their home villages, but they really are quite urban in what they consume, how they dress, and etc.

Another type is the ones who are working outside their home communities to make advancement, to come back and construct a little entrepreneurship like a little shop back home. They are investing back in the rural areas. They, therefore, have become economic elites who take part in their promotion of the rural economic transformation. If you go to Isan (Northeastern Thailand) or Northern Thailand today, you are going to see shops, women owned apparel subcontracting shops for making clothing, and also 7-11 type shops. All of those are what you call a rural middle class.

from peasants to cosmopolitan villagers
the transformation of "rural" northeastern Thailand

จากขบวนการสู่คนงานโลก:
ชีวิตทันสมัยของชาวชนบทอีสาน
Professor Charles F. Keyes
ภาควิชามานุษยวิทยา คณะสังคมวิทยาและมานุษยวิทยา

15 พฤศจิกายน 2553 || 13.00 - 16.00 น.
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From peasants to cosmopolitan villagers
by Professor Charles F. Keyes



Copyright ©2011 @PACEYES A peasant couple enjoy watching their mobile TV at the Bangkok central station while waiting for the train back home.

Q Can you support the claim they have some kind of local supply chain and local outsourcing from nearby cities to the villages to do specific production jobs?

A The labor has been going to local factories in the countryside, which is increasing. About 10 years ago, there was a policy that tried to promote a diverting of the factories near the labor sources, instead of having people come to Bangkok to work in the factories and be working in those circumstances. That is one type of local outsourcing of labor. For outsourcing of goods, you have people who are agents for those goods: the best example is mobile phone cards. In villages nowadays there are people who are very into making their own livings, so selling mobile phone cards is one way. They are kinds of agents of the companies that sell mobile phones and connections, and you can find that happening all over the world today.

Q In Southeast Asia, domestic and international migration of labor is diverse. When will a significant mass of rural cosmopolitans emerge around the villages in the region, and if so, how might it affect an urban-rural migration in the next decade and so on?

A Interestingly, it is hard to say what specific circumstances it may lead to. Looking at the macroeconomic level, it is very hypothetical. There was an article in The Economist two weeks ago about migration. Migration is still a major part of the world today, but it is different! Traditionally, there is a migration of people who are poor, looking for jobs in a better place in their countries. But now you see a lot of people migrating from European countries to India and China with skills, because those countries are trying to upgrade their skills, and that is really changing the pattern. Comparing "the modern migrants", the model

we have from the 19th century is no longer applicable today. The modern migrants in the 19th century were people who came from very poor countries storming in to other countries. It is still true to a great deal, but it is also no longer the only pattern. And I think we are going to see more and more types of migration. There is a migration trend for people who don't want to live in the cities anymore. They have a house in the countryside. They are not villagers, but they are moving to the countryside, so you can see that trend as well.

Q **Global workers, foreign sons-in-law, and the local sage are three change agents within a village. What is your foresight towards the shifting roles of local politicians, religious leaders, and others regarding the socio-environmental transformation?**

A Let me take one particular type of local agent that I think is very significant all over Asia - a man with a local worker - people who recruit labor to go and work abroad or work in Bangkok. According to Pattara Patiyata's research on Thai migrants in Singapore, Thai migrants in Singapore almost all come from certain areas, the same district (Ampur) and province (Changwat). The reason is they have been connected with the labor recruiters, and the labor recruiter has very important roles. That is one thing that happens. There are also labor recruiters lending money. If you go abroad, you are going to a workplace like Libya. Interestingly, the fact is that there are over 20,000 Thai workers in Libya. Some of the articles, which are written about them, are talking about how much it costs for them to get a job in Libya. They have to pay the recruiters, sometimes they must raise money they don't have, so the recruiters also lend them money. So, the recruiters have very significant roles.

Economically, there are certain types of people that are very significant. You have the "cultural workers", the people who are promoting ways of connecting to the larger world, to different cultural practices. I think what is interesting here is the transformation and teaching of modern cultural practices. In Northeastern Thailand, you have traditional folk opera (mor lam). They can transform into the "mor lam zing" to a sort of very very sexy, very modern entertainment, primarily for urban audiences, not rural audiences. And those people have significant roles. There are people who create those mor lam troops, who recruit people to be the singers and the players, so then you have a certain type of cultural worker.

And then you have the political brokers. The political brokers have become very important because, in Thailand, really prior to the elections of the 2000's—the elections of this decade—rural voters were only significant in so far as they could be mobilized by local people to support their local power structure. One of the things you have to realize that Thaksin did was to create a sense of rural empowerment. And that

meant that people saw themselves not just as the votes you buy or the votes that you recruit, but also they have a sense of voting for themselves. The people who are election campaigners - those that are in charge of voting, have a different role than they had 20 years ago; they are more like those in other countries that have really democratic systems, in which people really have to know their rural community, they have to be able to speak the local language, they have to be able to communicate well with the local people in order to really mobilize their support. So then you have very significant roles for those brokers. Then, the representatives who get elected are very different from the ones who used to get elected, the old-style representatives. I think you will see that happening eventually in China or Vietnam, in places that do not have democratic systems.

Q **Are the roles of religious leaders in the rural areas still as strong as in the past?**

A It is different. There still is some importance. In the past, the primary significant players in the rural communities were monks and ex-monks. Men who had passed a monkhood and learnt certain skills, they learned how to be an astrologer and a traditional doctor. Then, those skills became disconnected with globalization. Traditional doctors - people who specialize in using herbal medicine - really became quite marginalized, when you got very expensive western, modern medicine. The traditional path was of men spending their time as monks, where they didn't learn only the monk's ways but also certain skills that they could use when they left the monkhood. But I think that is gone. Now it is education. Now the important thing is to have your children educated as far as you can take them. And maybe they will be able to utilize these skills significantly, not only for their jobs but also for their local communities.

Q **A grand scale diffusion of information has been occurring, increasing the learning speed of technological innovation that serves rural connectivity, the means of the rural economy, and sustaining their community will be visible in some villages. What is your comment on this?**

A Before we talk about IT, I think we should talk about more traditional kinds of technological innovation. I think the first technological innovation you have seen in Asia was the introduction of the Japanese hand plough to replace the water buffalo, and the labor saving was immense. People adopted that widely, because it made sense for you to do it. And, then you got the more innovative, multi-purpose engine like Kubota. That was local innovation, something they borrowed from outside. So, you have openness to innovation throughout rural Asia, very much so.



The Vietnamese motorist on his phone while riding his bike. Some rights reserved by audrey_sel

As for IT, the mobile phone is by far the most significant technological innovation of the 21st century. It is just revolutionary. Without that, there were times when you got just one line with one village. That was an amazing innovation for the people concerned.

Q **What about the motorcycle?**

A I think we have to go back to the evolution in transportation that began in the early 20th century with railways. If you go back to the 19th century, the French and the British were proposing to build railways all over Asia. It is interesting that the idea is now coming back, as China is talking about building a railway from Kunming down to Singapore. That 19th century idea could be a way of transforming the world.

Then, in between those two periods, there were highways that have motivated people to travel, and with that came the use of motor vehicles more and more. And that began to expand to motorbike vehicles in upcountry in Thailand. First, it is small to start with, and an individual vehicle. So the motorcycle became the first choice because it is cheaper than a pick-up or a car. People began to have sufficient money to help them move around more easily. But in fact, if you think about the way people move about, a motorcycle has a limited range. You cannot travel from Udonthani to Bangkok easily on a motorcycle. It is for the movement of people for commuting to and from work. The motorcycle has really consumerized travel in a significant way. Especially in Ho Chi Minh City, you cannot travel around the city without one. When I went to Hanoi the first time in 1988 there were not a lot of motorcycles, it was a city of bicycles. Everybody rode bicycles. There were few trucks. But if you take a look at Hanoi today, Hanoi is a scene completely full of motorcycles. It was a huge transformation. Bicycles just disappeared, even though they were a very important mode of transportation in Vietnam.

Q **What is it about the next generation of this particular form of technological innovation, in your opinion?**

A For me, the desire for anybody who wants to be a member of the rural middle class is to have a car. A lot of cars are pick-ups, so you can have lower vehicle taxes. So it allows more people to have a pick-up as their private car.

Q **What is your vision for the future of rural poverty in this region?**

A What I can think of are the marginal people. In the north, you have a lot of people who live up in the hills, the so-called the Hill-tribe people, who are more marginalized as the modern world's ethnic minority.



ABOUT PROFESSOR CHARLES F. KEYES

Charles Keyes, is Professor Emeritus of Anthropology and International Studies at the University of Washington. He has been on the faculty the University of Washington since 1965 and has served at this institution as chair of the department of anthropology (1985-1990) and director of the center for Southeast Asian Studies (1986-1997). In addition to serving as president of the Association for Asian Studies, he has been chair of the joint Social Science Research Council/American Council of Learned Societies Committee on Southeast Asia and chair of the executive committee and board of the Southeast Asian Studies Summer Institute. He currently serves on the editorial boards of five professional journals and is on the publication committee of the University of Washington Press. He is the senior editor of the series, "Critical Dialogues in Southeast Asian Studies" for the UW Press.

Currently, Prof. Keyes is a visiting professor at Center for Ethnic Studies and Development (CESD) and Regional Center for Social Science and Sustainable Development (RCSD) at Chiang Mai University, Thailand during September 12th to December 25th. In addition to his own fieldworks, he will give lectures and supervise students of both centers.